

Lost in the Shuffle

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Summary: Lauren just wanted to live under the radar in a quiet, Combine controlled existence, but things get a little screwy when her relocation train crashes and a captured refugee sees a chance to escape.

1. Prologue

****I do not own any of the concepts, characters, creatures, or ideas present in the Half Life series-they belong to Valve.****

****Note that this takes place about eight years before the events of Half-Life 2. Rated T for later violence and mild language.****

****...I would appreciate some feedback, it's a work in progress and will probably need revising later.****

* * *

><p>Lauren didn't know how anyone could sleep riding on a relocation train. It was uncomfortable and claustrophobic, rattling her teeth because the ride couldn't even bother to be smooth. True, she was absolutely exhausted at this point, up since three in the morning and keeping herself on edge for every subsequent moment, and it probably would help if she got in a few hours of rest, but the metal seats were cold and hard. It just baffled her that she was the only one awake.<p>

Maybe they were better at adapting than she was. She'd been moved around so many times that she [now had a system for figuring out how long she could expect to stay somewhere before getting shunted back again], and had still never gotten used to it. Some of them looked a little younger than her, too. It was probably easier to adjust to an unyielding surface when you couldn't remember the feel of a pillow, or even a cushioned seat.

Although a part of her thought that the back pain would give a hint

at what you were missing.

How long had they been traveling? She hoped this wasn't one of those things where you think they're just shipping you upstate, and then you find out that they moved you all the way over to Russia while you weren't paying attention. She didn't think so. Someone had said they were headed for City 23. Wherever the hell that was. It was probably still on the continent at least, not a _huge_ gap between that and 9.

The length of the trip had still reached that point where resting her legs had become an entirely unbearable practice. They creaked as she stood, striding over to one of the windows and trying not to think about how low the ceiling was, how close together the walls were. The train was going at that peculiar speed where the world outside wasn't a blur, but it was fast enough to frustrate the eyes when they tried to focus on anything. The sun had moved to the opposite side of the sky since they'd set out, and was the only indicator of time passing.

In the distance she could catch a glimpse of a group of the large, tripedal Striders trudging along towards a destination of their own, black silhouettes against the approaching evening. She wondered if they had the capability to mind walking the whole way, or resent the hunter-choppers that were smugly flying overhead—maybe they were as mindless as the soldiers that the Union pumped out each year.

They were outside though. It couldn't have been all that bad.

Was it her imagination, or did the train just _lurch_? Face paling, she stumbled back to her seat and tried to imagine a nice, bright field with chrysanthemums and swaying trees. The thought instead put dead grass in her mind, so she moved all her focus into staring at her worn out shoes and not further emptying her stomach on them.

"Are-are you okay?"

She looked up, a female passenger awake and staring at her in what must have been some approximation of concern.

Lauren wasn't used to much more than apathy or mania from other citizens. "I-It's-I don't-I don't like riding in-in trains." She hated the way her words stumbled over each other, the way this girl kept staring at her like she was some fragile, scatterbrained _nitwit_ that had drunken too much Private Reserve at once.

"Oh." She had pinkish blond hair; a curly mess that somehow still looked nice haphazardly sprawled about on her head as it was. Lauren's own was always tangled and often the color of muddy straw. Maybe if she ignored her, this sleeper would stop paying attention. She withdrew into her trembling limbs to stare off into the far side of the train car.

Did it just rattle again? No, it was her imagination; it was just because she was tired, just because her nerves were-

"Did you feel that?"

This time, when the train shook it almost threw Lauren off her seat,

and she couldn't suppress a terrified shriek. At once there began a cacophony of mutters as everyone else was brought from their own sleep, wondering what had just happened, why they had been robbed of their rest, they needed all the energy they had to deal with the CPs at the next stationâ€”The lights flickered and she tried to pull herself into as tight a ball as she could.

The car rocked her back as the rest of the train launched itself off the rails, and before her head cracked against a metal wall she was able to get one more glimpse of other terrified faces before everything went black.

2. Train Crashes Hurt

In a few ways, Lauren was actually kind of lucky. Few phobics ever received such a confirmation of what they had been dreading, a reassurance that their irrational fears were not, in fact, irrational. That was not the lucky partâ€”that was actually rather horrible. The lucky thing was that when the bright rays of a burning sun washed over her half lidded eyes, they opened. As in, she was not dead. With a sharp intake of breath, she tried to pull herself up into a sitting position and ended up smacking her forehead on something cold and hard.

"Owâ€|owâ€|okayâ€| "

She was still inside the train. But, on the positive side, it had stopped moving.

Letting herself fall back, and wincing as the back of her head hit the metal wall behind her, she closed her eyes and tried to focus on any personal damage the crash might have caused. Arms and legs seemed to be working, if incredibly sore. Her chest didn't feel like it had been ripped open, applying pressure to her sides didn't cause any significant painâ€|Something warm and wet was pasted over her face, and hopefully that had nothing to do with her splitting headache.

That was enough for her. Time to get out of this death trap.

Trying not to aggravate any injuries she might not yet be aware of, Lauren flipped herself over onto her stomach and started crawling towards the jagged hole in the end of the train. It was at that point, correctly positioned, that she realized she was upside down.

The trainâ€”the train was upside down.

Upside down and halfway crushed, like a stepped on aluminum can that she'd had the misfortune of being inside. And she'd thought it had been confining beforeâ€|

It was too bad that there were no longer any screeches of tearing metal, because now she had to listen to the choked gurgling of other citizens, trying to breathe with their lungs punctured, or whatever else was wrong with them, like being trapped under benches or sliced in half. The sun still had a ways to go before it set; she could see drying blood and tissue, her hands squelching through some of it as she pulled herself forward.

Disgusting.

Good God, she was going to be sick. With the way things were going, it would be before she got out of the train, and not after, and she'd have to crawl through that too.

She shook her head and forced the nausea down, finally reaching the outside and staggering to her feet. The wind ruffled her matted hair, and she let out a small sigh. Saying that she was lucky would be going too far, but all the sameâ€

Even with her eyes gazing along the length of the train, she couldn't see why it had crashed. Honestly, she didn't careâ€"she was alive, and that was all that countedâ€Unless they had hit some kind of creature that was large enough to derail a train and still alive. But she doubted there was anything like that around.

â€They were still in America, right?

The tracks were set uphill, pulled up from their rivets and twisted into the air. Left or right, which way was to City 23? Would she be in trouble for this, if she went the wrong way? Could she pretend that this never happened if she checked in at the right office? And would they even notice she was gone? Lauren entertained the notion of pretending to be deadâ€"running away from the towering Citadels that you could see no matter where you were in the city, the masked ghouls that pushed you along to hear you cry out, the tight train cars and crowded, run-down apartments, the idiot on the TV with the same damn message over and over and over againâ€

She entertained the premise of freedom on the dying grass and struggling trees, all the way across the track.

The thoughts were banished from her mind at the reverberating call that sliced through the air, the sight of some distant dropship coming towards the wreckage to reclaim any survivors.

Of course they would be all over this. They controlled everything.

Lauren didn't even know that she had let her hopes up until they came crashing back down on her shoulders. The conflict of interest was that she didn't want to go back. Underneath the bruising and cuts from the train she could feel deeper wounds from electrified stun sticks and steel toed boots. Maybe if this had come a few years earlier she would have had the strength to say she'd had enough and just run, instead of turning intoâ€"intoâ€"something. Names escaped her. It was something weak with locked legs stupidly standing there while it got run down.

A hand gripped her wrist and she screamed. She reflexively jerked back and stumbled off to the side.

"Why are you just standing around?!" It was the girl. She was looking in her face, desperation and maybe some determination lighting up two puffy red eyes. Maybe they had been that way before. Looking at her up close...

This girl couldn't have been older than fifteen. A teenager. A dying

breed_.

Her hands were bloody and _gross_, and she was smearing some of it on Lauren's wrists.

"They're coming, come on!" Dragging her towards that stretch of yellowing grass and thick trees. If she'd been feeling any less shocked from the how quickly circumstances were changing, she would have told her not to bother. Told her that hordes of Stalkers were made of people with similar ideas. Pulled her hand away. As it was, something about the girl's voice and her still throbbing headache imparted a delirious sense of urgency, aggravated by the sound of the dropship roaring overhead. Before she knew it, she was also running for her life.

"I don't suppose you have a plan, or, maybe a destination in mind?" she called out, trying not to get her feet tangled in the foliage as they passed the forest line. A loud roar sounded somewhere behind them, and she tripped anyway.

"Away from_ them_." the girl replied impatiently, stopping to help Lauren to her feet. The daze was starting to wear off, and Lauren felt like arguing that it wasn't the _greatest_ plan in the world, but she looked up and saw the desperation again, and all comments died in her throat. She just dimly nodded and pitched forward.

The roar of some creature echoed through the air as they ran, and she couldn't tell if it had come from what they were quickly leaving behind or where they were currently headed.

Oh yes.

Things were just _splendid_.

3. Can't Catch a Break

Lauren had heard horror stories of citizens that tried to escape Union rule. Frightened whispers in midnight gatherings of sadistic experiments and skeletal Stalkers. Not as many people discussed the bizarre creatures that had decided to call Earth their new home, but the tales were there too. Vicious tentacled beasts that charged like enraged bulls, parasites that would latch onto your head and hijack your body, three legged dogs with a hundred eyes instead of a headâ€¦|

She absently nudged at some dirt with her foot. The panic was over and a strange sort of reticence had settled over her. They had gotten a good distance in when the girl-who had identified herself as a writing utensil-declared that it was okay to stop and rest.

Writing utensil. Pen. The pun didn't lift her spirits at all, and she had the suspicion that her sense of humor was degrading too badly for even herself to appreciate. At any rate, she was likely just one of those people that hated the name Penelope and had the misfortune to be saddled with it at birth.

Pen was pacing around the small clearing they'd settled in anxiously, like she was looking for something, or maybe trying to decide what to do next. Lauren, on the other hand, had settled on a tree stump,

hands on her knees and thankful that the standard civilian denim protected her from the various poison flora in the forest.

Only mostly. She had already counted out her lacerations through bloody tears in the fabric that stung now that she'd noticed they were there. None of her injuries seemed to be too serious-bruises, pulled muscles and the aforementioned cuts. Superficial things. They couldn't compare to the awful sinking feeling slowly settling in her chest.

"Lauren?"

She scowled, and stopped when the tug of dried blood on her face alerted her to it. For twelve or so years it had just been "You", "her", and "***Citizen***", and now it felt wrong to hear her name again from a stranger. Exchanging names meant that you had to start caring, no exceptions.

She decided not to answer, mumbling out a brief "Thinking." and pointedly looking in the other direction.

Pen didn't press her further, for whatever reason she'd tried to get her attention. Lauren couldn't resist looking her way after the few seconds of silence, and saw that she'd decided on scaling a nearby oak for her course of action. It was impressive and ridiculously funny looking at the same time.

"What are you doing?" she asked, voice too weak to be heard. Maybe if she cleared her throat a little, it would be easier to shout. But she didn't want to. Perhaps it wasn't a good idea to draw attention to herself, even if there weren't surveillance cameras always hovering overhead. How alone were they, really?

Did a branch snap? Did she only imagine the rustling of some foliage as faceless soldiers came for her?

She whipped her head around and didn't see anyone, but that didn't mean they weren't there. She thought of the dropship, and suddenly it didn't seem like a good idea to loiter in such an exposed clearing.

Her heart was in her throat again. When did that happen? It amazed her how easy it was to go from calm to panicking at almost literally nothing.

"Uhâ€|Heyâ€|" Well, she was going to have to address the girl by name some time anyway. "P-Pen?" she called up, wincing as she got to her feet and limped over. "Do you-do you see anyone?"

Pen didn't respond for a few seconds, and right when Lauren was considering yelling again, she turned back, frowning down at her with her hair dropping into little blood soaked ringlets around her face. "What?"

"Do you see anyone? Like, Civil Protection, orâ€|"

Pen gave a cursory glance over the surrounding area, and then looked back at Lauren. "I don't see anyone."

Of course, that didn't mean they weren't there. "Why are you up there

anyway?"

"What?"

She sighed and raised her voice again. "Why were you stricken with the impulse to go tree climbing?"

"I'm trying to see if I can find a good destination for us to head towards."

"And?"

"Tree's not tall enough." Pen shook her head and started to climb down. "I think we should keep going straight though. I couldn't see much, but I think the forest line ends somewhere up ahead."

An even bigger exposed clearing. "Great. That. That sounds fine."

No more consultation needed, apparently. But that was okay; she'd just stare at her feet, and try not to get too optimistic.

Staring at her feet turned out to be a bit more difficult than anticipated. The change in scenery was refreshing for the most part, she had to admit. Citizens weren't allowed to keep plants growing within city walls, and no one was allowed to take walks in the wilderness. Ever. Maybe it was to keep people corralled and hopeless. Maybe it was to protect them from everything out there that had a taste for human flesh

She'd missed this. Well, she missed looking at nature—not jumping at every noise she heard that didn't sound like it was from Earth. So far they hadn't seen much to be frightened of—a couple of the multiple eyed dogs that left them alone ("houndeyes", Pen called them) and a few creatures that had attached themselves to some particularly thick tree limbs and let what was probably their tongues hang down to the ground ("barnacles"). The latter were particularly disgusting. She avoided looking whenever they passed one by, but had trouble blocking out the sickening squish of their mouths as they pulled in stray birds that hadn't been careful.

It would have almost been pleasant to trudge through in relative silence, as long as she didn't think about getting caught or eaten.

"You—you do know you have blood on your face, right?" Pen asked quietly, her head dipping a little in an uncertain glance. Lauren glared ahead, rather than into those puffy eyes, and pushed forward.

"Yes. It's fine."

"Oh." Pause. "I'm only asking because you look kind of like a zombie."

"A what?"

Pen cleared her throat. "You—those, um, well they look like—"

"I know what a zombie is." Lauren wiped her cheek with her sleeve, not bothering to check if she'd actually cleared it off. Her tone seemed to have killed the discussion.

The trees thinned, and, to her decreasing consternation, Lauren found that there were suddenly less branches to smack her in the face. That was nice. There was a bird singing somewhere, and she wanted to sit back on that tree stump back in that clearing and just listen to it. Pretend that was all there was to the world.

Her foot caught on a protruding root and she let her mood plummet back downward.

There. There was the forest edge. It wasn't as dramatic a transition as she'd have liked, really. Not a whole lot of cover to stand there and look over the opening like something that hid in the trees to make sure there weren't predators around.

God, she was tired.

A stream flowed through ahead of them, at which Pen gave a vaguely happy little gasp and darted forward. The grass was dying, and as she followed, somewhat more sullenly, Lauren got a good view of the rotting flowers scattered about.

The stream didn't gurgle, or babble, or murmur, so her respect for every nature writer ever went down. It reminded her more of people marching. From the looks of the dirt at its edge, the water level had been higher at some earlier point, and probably dropped recently. A surprising number of paranoid thoughts crossed her mind at that.

She shook them off.

Lauren peered down into the water, as if looking into its reflective surface would tell her how safe it was. All she could see was her own face, staring back up at her like a wounded animal. Or a zombie. There was that scar on her left cheek, the stress lines on her eyes, the

"When did that?" She reached a hand up and traced a finger around some graying strands of hair. That wasn't that wasn't even worth a sigh, was it? And that was sad. She kind of missed the days when this would have triggered some kind of crisis of self-esteem. Now it was a footnote. Maybe there'd be time to act broken up about it later.

"I know it probably isn't safe to wash up with until our cuts have scabbed over. Or drink," Pen was saying beside her, twirling two fingers around in the stream. "Still, it's nice to know there's a water source here. Maybe we'll find some iodine or something and we can come back."

Lauren stifled a derisive snort. She had no idea where it came from. Maybe there was something funny about the word "iodine".

The sun was starting to go down, heavy shadows rising to greet the two of them. At the other side of the water there were more trees, less in number than the forest they had just exited. She could almost see buildings past them. Was that a good thing or not? The Union hadn't converted all the towns into their living centers, and she

couldn't see a Citadel from hereâ€¦

"Is that a town?" Pen hopped over the stream and started forward. "Maybe there are some refugees hiding out there that have some clean water."

"Or maybe they have soldiers waiting to catch fugitives who think there are refugees with water." Lauren muttered, moving to where the stream was thinnest and stepping over it.

"It's worth investigating."

"Is it? Is it really?"

Pen glanced back and gave her an odd look. "You want to spend the night in the forest?"

"It's preferable to a razor train, yeah." Lauren had meant the line to come out with scathing sarcasm, but for some reason it was said instead as an evasive mumble. She cleared her throat and jogged a bit to catch up, trying not to trip as they entered the new tree line. And succeeding, for once. "Best case scenario is that it'll be relatively abandoned. With the man-eating aliens I've been hearing so much about."

The girl shrugged, hair bobbing a little. "Still a roof. My family would stay in little abandoned towns all the time."

"What?"

"What?"

Her family wouldâ€¦ Lauren rubbed her temples and tried to get the tired gears in her mind to turn. "Youâ€¦? Oh. Oh, you were a fugitive already, weren't you?"

"Kindâ€¦of. My parents were technically theâ€¦ Oh, look, we're almost there."

They weren't really almost there, and the attempt to change the subject was so blatant that the conversation dropped like it had been shot in the knee. So the two walked the rest of the way listening to something they couldn't see making distant, unearthly roars, and the odd crow.

Lauren didn't like crows. They were rude and complained about everything.

It was just as well. The way the discussion almost headed had started to make her uncomfortable. Pen's face had begun to take on a peculiar sort of choked expression, and Lauren didn't think she would be any good at providing consolation for whatever horrible thing the Union had done to her family for evading them since their occupation began.

It really was getting dark, wasn't it?

If there was something lurking in those dark streets, it would be very easy for it to sneak up on the both of them. Like

zombies.

Dammit, Pen.

In a few more steps Lauren could feel the gravel beneath her shoes. The buildings loomed over them and the air had gone relatively quiet. Broken glass and crumbled brick littered the ground and threatened to tear up their shoes. If there was any wind, it might have whistled through the buildings, creating eerie sounds that would keep more imaginative people from sleeping for a few days at least. As it was, there was no wind, and that made the strange noises that attracted Lauren's attention so much worse.

Ordinarily, the dark was not something on her "fear list". In fact, there were relatively few things that she was actually afraid of. Like most sane people, getting eaten alive was one of them.

"Do we pick a building and board up the door?" she asked, her voice constricting a little as it had a tendency to do lately.

"You don't want to explore at all?"

"At _night_?"

"_Evening_. There's a difference." Pen shrugged. "I suppose we could find someplace to sleep if you really wanted to."

"I do."

"Any preferences?"

Lauren paused and looked around. Each building looked like a horrifying, architect's worst nightmare deathtrap. Sighing, she picked out the closest, most stable looking building. "Can we go there?"

"We have to make sure nothing's in it first." Without consultation, Pen picked up a piece of debris at her feet, tested its weight, and hurled it through the nearest windowâ€"breaking _any_ sense of quiet and causing [what seemed like the whole area] around them to break out into a chorus of moans and howls.

Lauren yelped, jumping as bloodied, humanoid creatures with bulbousâ€"growthsâ€"for heads crawled out of the holes in the wall and succumbed to gravity.

And that image was never coming out from the back of her eyelids.

"Ooookay, wrong building." Pen grabbed her hand again and dragged her back into that feverishly pitched run that she had at the wreck site. The building had a door, which blasted open as they ran past it, out pouring more of theâ€"things, long, clawlike fingers swiping with an erratic, violent propensity towards the two's already quite lacerated flesh.

Lauren cried out, her voice lost once more among the noise. She would have taken anything else, maybe even getting locked in a closet, if it meant she didn't have to run with raw feet and broken down muscles.

She tripped.

Of course she had the common courtesy to let go and not drag the more coordinated runner down with her. The gravel tore at her palms, but the fact that she might have just broken her toe detracted from her awareness of it. There was a crack as someone's foot (although who's foot would it be but Pen's?) connected with one of the monsters that was closing in. As she staggered to her feet she saw it flop down beside them, a human face twisted in terror with the bloated, crab-like animal that had attached itself to their head falling nearby.

Oh.

Oh.

She was being pulled away again, Pen stumbling and limping because she had probably just broken her entire _foot_, back through the streets with the city waking up in a hideous, nightmarish uproar. It must _be_ a nightmare. It had all the trappings of one, except for the fact that she could feel pain. No, this was real, they were getting away, she could hear them growing farther away the faster they went. With a small bit of morbid curiosity, she slowed and looked back, straining her eyes to see their jerky marionette movements. Not shambling corpses. Close enough for the muscular inefficiency, though.

Wait. Pen thought she looked like THOSE?

"Alright, so, bad move on my part," Pen huffed, and Lauren worked up the energy to glare. "I'm used to headcrabs, but I guess it's different when you don't have a hunting rifleâ€|"

Lauren coughed and shook her head, only able to express some numb agreement. Her muscles were trembling a little as she slipped around the next corner, sinking into a crouch. Pen started talking again, but she was feeling lightheaded all of a sudden and didn't care to hear any of it.

They. Were going to _die._

A cold metal rod was being shoved into her clammy fingers, and she stared at it. A loose pipe. What exactly was she supposed toâ€"oh.

Pen nudged her shoulder and pointed up at the wall behind them. Off to the side the whole wall had crumbled, leaving a small pile of brick to climb up to the top level with. Higher ground. They made their way up, Pen picking up a few of the bricks as they went. It had probably been an apartment building at some point, judging by the rows of numbered rooms. Some of the ceiling had fallen through, blocking off the hallway.

They were getting closerâ€"the headcrabs. Lauren could hear them. She stationed herself by the collapsed wall and waited for them to come.

The first started off from the right, and she only had a few seconds to react at the sound of its muffled roars. Her throat was getting

sore from all the screaming, and as she cracked the pipe against the side of its head, she wished they would approach from the front like decent zombies.

To her dismay, she found that this wasn't going to be a one-hit kill scenario, and she'd only succeeded in making it stagger. A second swing smashed it up against the wall, and she squeezed her eyes shut so she wouldn't see the distorted, hideous face.

Oh. Too late.

Another backhanded her from the side and the pipe slipped from her grasp. Funny how quickly they could move when left unobserved—it was right up in her face, oh God oh God. She backpedaled as quickly as she could, running her hand along the wall to keep steady and stopping as her fingers snagged on something.

It was one of those glass cases you break for emergencies. With an axe. She wondered how Pen could've missed it. The next few moments were quick and probably pulled something in her arm, but the result was some glass on the floor, a few reopened wounds on her fist and the axe head buried in both the headcrab and, probably, the unfortunate victim's skull.

Its limbs still thrashed around a little when she pulled the axe out.

There were two more to deal with now, and Lauren was concerned with the exhilaration she felt at dispatching them so quickly.

"We're leaving."

Lauren yelped and almost chopped the girl's head off. But then she realized that zombies couldn't talk. Pen, however, was completely unfazed, although there was a greater sense of urgency that hadn't been there before. "What?"

"We have to go, now. Come on."

She couldn't be dragged this time because she still had her hands on the axe, so the two just jogged out of the building at reasonable distances from each other and the encroaching zombie horde.

"I rigged the building to explode." Pen explained, unprompted.

"Oh—What?!"

Maybe this would all make sense in the morning. Some things did. If they lived that long. For now, Lauren could only gape at the pink haired girl and shift her bloody axe onto her shoulder so that her arms didn't get tired as they picked up the pace. "Is this the normal method for dealing with headcrabs?"

Pen thought a moment, looking back. "If they've infested the place. Which they have. They're a pretty troublesome bunch, sometimes it's the only way to be safe"

The explosion was so loud that a sharp, obnoxious ringing was the only sound that Lauren heard for a good minute or so, the shockwave

sending her stumbling back. Although, it seemed more fire based than percussion. It certainly _seemed_ enough to destroy a horde, but she had no experience in the matter. She watched with more morbid fascination as those too unlucky to die in the initial blast were consumed by the flames, writhing and howling. The chorus was horrifying and utterly fascinating.

"Iâ€|Well, that's normally a last resortâ€|attracts too much attentionâ€|" Pen said faintly.

Revoltingly fascinating.

"Should weâ€" "

"_No more rocks."_ It was a little louder than intended, snapped from her mesmerization and probably because she had trouble hearing it herself.

Pen held her hands up defensively. "All right, all right."

"I don't need any more surprises. Or zombies. Or _exploding buildings._" Lauren added, glancing up at the towering structure they'd stopped by. Rather tall, with windows that glinted a little in the moonlight. It was a good thing that the two of them weren't standing too close to the wall, because it exploded. An abomination even worse than the zombies leaped out at them from the gaping hole.

The axe clattered to the street as Lauren took in the sight. There was only a moment, but that moment was enough for it to imprint itself in her mind, possibly as nightmare fuel for the next time she tried to sleep. The thing was _almost_ humanoidâ€"stood on two legs, albeit with more joints and hoof-like feet, had twoâ€|primary arms, and a head that carried one of the parasitic pests on top of it, fangs sunk deep into its one large, red eyeâ€|It had dark, greenish brown skin, slick with blood that might or might not have been its own. The middle of its chest had split openâ€"like the others, but was thankfully covered by an opaque membrane to conceal the insides, one arm on either side of the cavity. Or possibly, what had once been one arm and was now two. Four arms.

There was actually something strangely familiar about its form.

Whatever it was, it spasmed and twisted like an amusement park animatronic that had rusted over and still wanted to enact whatever ghastly dance it was programmed for. Its guttural, resonant screams lanced through the night air and chilled her down to her bone marrow.

Lauren saw green light sputtering on its fingertips, right before it arced through the air and launched her backwards. Her whole body convulsed in pain and her vision swam. It felt like one hundred stun sticks smacking her simultaneously, all set to the highest voltage possible. Right on her stomach. Every muscle contracted and twitched, little spots dancing around her eyes. She'd already gone through her threshold for abuse this week.

So she passed out.

As everything went dark, a thin blue light cut through the air and settled its beam on the creature's head.

She was too far gone to hear the loud _crack_ that followed.

4. Feeling Missed

Lauren didn't dream much, or at least, never recalled having done so. It was because the anxiety that held her in a constant chokehold always smothered her memories of them when they arrived. Well, that and the haze that came from constantly passing out in pain.

She got a lot of sleep that way. Insomnia would make her walk, and walking out late would draw in the Civil Protection officers bored on the night shift and eager to test their new batons, and try out this thing called "pistol whipping" that they'd heard so much about. Somehow she always managed to wake up in her apartment, a little worse for wear but her sense of status quo intact. Occasionally it was just the exhaustion that got to her, and that didn't make the pain much better. The day would start on the floor, because there wasn't any room on the couches, and the first thing she'd see was the ceiling. If she was lucky, the shutdown transitioned into real sleep sometime during the night and her head wouldn't hurt so much.

She opened her eyes and there it was, the cracked plaster under a brightening dawn that she'd come to know and despise that signaled the end of any respite from the real world she could desperately grab. It took her a full minute to realize that this was different; she was on a stiff mattress instead of the floor, in a room that had not had its walls knocked out to make a community living space.

What.

A hiss escaped her teeth as she tried to sit up, every bruise, cut, and burn reminding her of their presence with indignant rage.

Bits and pieces of last night floated back into her head; the crash, running away from the recovery dropship (though not what she had been thinking at the time that would have prompted such a ridiculously stupid act), walking through the trees, stumbling into the ghost town, etcetera etcetera. It was all a little fuzzy after the exploding building, but, surprisingly, she was headache free, and that was at least one plus.

Her feet, like everything else, hadn't completely healed from last night. Standing on them caused waves of raw pain in various areas of her legs, never mind just the soles of her feet. In fact, maybe it would be better to sit back down, just ruminate on her stiffness for a while. The springs squealed in protest, and she looked down at herself for the first time, covered in bandages with a slightly inexperienced attempt to clean off all the blood and grit off of her clothes and skin.

Ordinarily, the blankness on how she'd been moved to a living space was normal, but this was outside the reach of anyone with enough upper body strength to lift a corpse up some stairs, and that was a little concerning.

And this room was _too small_ besides_. There was hardly enough space for the bed, and she felt as if she only needed to reach up a hand to touch the ceiling. "Well, she tried and she couldn't, but that didn't help. It could drop at _any moment, _or the walls would inch inward and her organs would crush under her caving in ribcage. The door was open a crack at least. A sliver of light leaked through and gave her a small bit of comfort, though her heart rate still accelerated and her back began to sweat.

This was the second time in a row this week that she'd woken after getting knocked unconscious by something and gotten up in an unfamiliar situation. Days were supposed to be uniform, not, "situation"new situation"knockout"new new situation". The instability was almost maddening. At least a constant, incessant, droning voice about how great the Union was could be tuned out, or the TV unplugged. Nobody even minded if you took a day off, even if you had something resembling a job. You couldn't take a day off from being on the run.

The room was mostly bare, except for the mattress that she was sitting on and a small bedside table. A broken picture frame rested on the cool wooden surface, a worn family photo with beaming kids and proud parents, standing like they would in a painted portrait. The kind of family that was probably separated and systematically broken down when the Union arrived. In all likelihood, they were dead or worse, and this, this small picture was all that remained of the pieces that had been thrown to the wind.

It was a _just a piece of paper_. God, what was wrong with her?

The smell of something cooking drifted into the room, and as an angry dog would her stomach growled on cue. She hadn't eaten since what constituted as breakfast last morning, and it was starting to catch up with her. Deciding that her feet were well enough now to take the floor, she eased herself back up"Ow"and trotted out into a hallway lined with numbered rooms.

Too narrow. She was going to explode all over the walls if she wasn't careful.

This must have been another apartment building. Only a little worse kept than those she'd had to stay in recently, although it didn't have the scuff marks on the floor from hard rubber boots. The cooking aroma was coming from one of the rooms up ahead, as were two voices, only one of them Pen's.

As she approached, little snippets of conversation drifted and reached her ears. The stranger sounded like some sort of diluted English accent, something about kicking hornet nests, and Pen sounded a little choked, like her throat had a lump in it or.

"Knock knock." Lauren announced hoarsely, pushing the door ajar so she could enter.

"Oh!"I-I meant to check up on you. Glad you're okay," Pen sputtered from her seat on a destroyed couch, smearing the back of her fist against her cheeks as inconspicuously as she could. Lauren suspected she'd been completely forgotten in that back room, but that was fine. The man, who was stationed at the window and scanning the street with a modified sniper rifle, turned briefly in her direction and gave a

little wave. He didn't look too much older than Pen, with sandy brown hair and a hard glint in his eye that might bring a confused frown to more expressive people.

"How're you feeling?" he inquired, in a way that sounded like he didn't particularly care. "Any amusing twitches crop up overnight?"

"No." She tried her best disapproving glare in place of bemusement at such an odd comment. He cocked an eyebrow and grinned before turning back into his sniper scope, completely unfazed. She decided that he was some kind of lunatic hermit in the making, and it had nothing to do with her general unintimidating-ness, and turned to Pen. "I smelled food."

"Right." She sat up and leaned over, reaching to where they had set up a hotplate and offered a can of something chopped up and brown with a meaty scent. "I know it's not really breakfast food, but we can't be picky, right? I saved some for you in case you were hungry."

Oh. So she hadn't been completely forgotten after all. Lauren didn't know what to say, so instead she appraised the small meal. Canned food, not the packaged food substitute that she'd been eating since—forever ago. The meat was too salty and it might have spoiled somewhere down the line, but even so she thought she might cry and wolfed it down before she did.

There was a jug of water on the floor, she took a swig to wash down the food, it left her mouth with a vaguely sour taste. She almost asked what they'd been talking about, but her attention instead fixated on the window and the little figures marching around outside. "Oh—"

If that one syllable came out a little choked and strangled, it was because she was having a mini heart attack.

Things really were clearer in the light of day, weren't they? Before, her future had seemed so uncertain and unstable. Now that she'd had a night's sleep and restored some of her mental functions, could literally see clearly with the sun shining down on the horrendously maintained pavement outside with Civil Protection officers traipsing over the cracks and weeds—Well, she knew exactly where her future was heading now, but it didn't look to be anywhere good..

"Are you okay?"

Lauren didn't really mean to glare at Pen again—it was instinctual, and to her credit, she stopped before she'd turned all the way around, instead fixing her with a sort of dead eyed look. Floundering for a moment, she gave a curt, "I'm fine". It wasn't very convincing. Not especially because of the manner in which she shortly collapsed, shaking. They were talking again, but she'd gone deaf to them. She was back in the train, or locked in an interrogation room, and this room, spacious as it was, was too small, way too small. Her thoughts muddled, like she was—she was on a boat somewhere—

She flinched rather heavily when the man tapped her on the forehead. "You still in there?"

And she very badly wanted to stab him in the foot.

"It's my bad." Pen mumbled, glancing out towards those little searching figures and then back at her. Lauren felt vaguely, irrationally irritated that she knew why she was upset. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize." The lunatic moved back over to the window and began rifling through a fairly large steel box. "That won't change anything. Besides, that nest was depleting my ammunition, so it's a bit of a win-lose." She imagined he was smirking. "Win for me, lose for you."

"What do we do about Civil Protection?"

"'We'?" He gave Pen a look that bordered on incredulous. "And sacrifice my nice flat? They don't know anything about _me_."

"You helped us before," she insisted.

"That didn't involve losing my flat."

"We could go out there and tell them there's a guy up here with one of their guns." Pen said, like it was a casual suggestion. Lauren only snickered inwardly.

He gave her an almost maniac glare, for a moment she thought he was about to take a knife to their heads, and then the expression dropped immediately to thoughtfulness. The tone with the jovial lilt returned. "There is a tunnel system set up by someâ€|surviving militants not too far from here. They mentioned needing recruits, and having some extra supplies to toss my way if I happened to find some. I'm _sure _they'd be willing to take you in. Unless that conflicts with wherever it was you were heading before you went about waking up the dead?"

"Killing the dead." Lauren muttered, sullenly pulling a strand of hair out of her face. "â€|A-and I don't think they really counted as dead, anyway."

"Weâ€|" Pen shot an odd look Lauren's way. "Well, we weren't really going anywhere. Mostly justâ€|away fromâ€|them," She gestured to the window. The horrible people-things outside the window.

"Well then you'll have no objections."

"Are you going to send us over dead?" Lauren piped up. Meant it to sound sardonic and ended up more like half-crazed grumbling.

He seemed amused. She hated amusing people. It meant they didn't take her seriously. "I don't think I'd get much for that. No, I'll tell you whatâ€|there are a few supplies I don't need here, don't like them, never use them and frankly they just take up space. You take these, and then get out of my hair, right?"

* * *

><p>Apparently, his name was Richard. Lauren didn't really care, and she actually didn't want to know, but she couldn't help overhearing when Pen addressed him as such, so there it was. They didn't know

each other. They didn't behave as though they did. But they knew each other's names, and to her chagrin Pen had told him hers.<p>

She wanted to talk about how suspiciously convenient it was that he just so happened to be near an escape tunnel, or that they weren't even clear on where they would end up when they finished walking it, but it occurred to her that their escape would consist almost entirely of slinking through dark caverns and surrounded by hastily carved or water cut rock and _no sky_ and she shut up to avoid thinking about it at all. The idea that they might, as some people would say, end up recruited by rogue gun nuts in exchange for supplies didn't bode well with her either, but there wasn't a stellar list of options to go from so she was afraid to complain. Pen had claimed the rifle, citing previous use, which was no surprise, unfortunately leaving Lauren with theâ€|the shotgun.

"This does not bode wellâ€|" she'd muttered under her breath as Richard had led them out of his crummy flat. It felt awkward and heavy in her hands, and more than once Pen had to stop leading her to correct her grip. "The kickback might injure you", she'd warned, and Lauren had to stop herself from feeling resentful of getting instructions from a teenager. Ignoring the suggestion that not only would she have to carry a firearm, she'd also have to shoot somebody with it. She told herself it was for intimidation purposes, if they weren't even going to have a shooting range to learn how to use it. Like a CP could be intimidated by her.

She felt like a criminal. Like they were both criminals, sneaking through the streets, hiding in morning shadows of crumbled towers. With the police just around the corner, ready to beat them both to a pulp.

No. The defeatist attitude wasn't going to help anyone. She straightened up and tried to hold her shotgun like she was supposed to.

A brick cracked into the ground behind them and she jumped.

She almost wished they'd be spotted. Just to get it over with. The tunnel system was a great deal farther downtown than where they had started out, and at this rate it would take all day. There was no going straightâ€"they had to duck through side streets whenever possible, crouch through openings made with the decay of time in the buildings, change direction when they saw a CP, even from a distanceâ€"which happened a lot. And it was probably the same ones too, just vigilantly searching. Maybe five. That seemed the right number to gang up on two people. The building they had entered at that moment was some kind of office. Had a lobby, reception area, filled with cubicles, picked clean and barren of course, save for the stray paper or coffee cup. A few of the creaturesâ€"barnacles, she thoughtâ€"hung from the ceiling in odd places, making her nauseous with their presence. In a very sad way, they were the only life left there. The only things living in this sad memory.

Not that people had lived in office buildings before, butâ€|

"Hold up, hold up," Pen held up a hand, and they paused just behind a partially open, battered emergency exit doorway. Through the thin space between the door's edge and the wall, with sunlight spilling into the hall where they stood, a figure could be seen pacing around

outside. Lauren felt her breath freeze in her throat.

"We need to go through this wayâ€|" Pen muttered under her breath, "But let's see if we can find another way out, maybe another hole in the wallâ€|Come on."

Lauren didn't move. Her legs were too stiff. She found herself trying to read the ID code on his right armband when Pen came back for her a few seconds later.

"Lauren, come on. We can go around."

He was so close. She tilted her head to a different angle and caught view of the stunstick in his right hand. A shiver passed over her spine, and a few of the muscles in her face twitched uncomfortably.

"â€|Laur-"

"I know." She needed to tear herself away, force herself to focus on the task at hand. The pain in her feet, bruises, pulled muscles, physical things. Better than memories. Harder than it should have been, though.

Maybe they could have gotten farther, she would have continued on, but as she turned, she noticed that dot.

A little blue dot. Dancing around on the wall outside, out of everyone's sight but hers. Funny, she'd always thought of those dots as being red...

One second before the crack of the shot, Lauren saw the faint beam come into alignment with the officer's skull based gas mask. Her eyes turned away and she heard what sounded like the loud whine of a camera flash from somewhere as he fell, hard to notice from so far away. Especially above the really annoying, high pitched tone of a broken CP radio. She'd only heard it once beforeâ€|"a few anticitizens had ganged up on an officer with a couple beer bottles, a long time ago. Of course they'd been filled with more holes than stereotypical Swiss cheese a few seconds later and then burned as an example to others, and it was actually really demoralizing, but before that it had beenâ€|well, not entertaining. Inspiring? Memorable? Better than all the graffiti staining the community center.

The point was that now she found the noise exceedingly unnerving. It took Pen gripping her arm and nearly pulling it out of its socket to get her moving. The rest of them, they all had to have heard it, the shot. There could be no sneaking now; they'd all be actually looking now. A relief, certainly. Wasn't she just thinking that all of this was too easy?

The brick was open farther ahead, and the two came barreling through. Pen knew the way, it would have made sense to follow her, but fear/alarm/general urgency did not get along with sense, and by the time Lauren knew she was alone it was too late.

There was another shot. Two out of five. Maybe it wasn't best to gauge her odds by imagined numbers. It didn't matter how many were left, she would still run the whole way. But now she didn't know where she was going.

That bastard. He did this on purpose.

Farther downtown. Which way was downtown? She picked a direction and stuck with it. Perhaps it was some residual electricity from last night (Zombies that could shoot lightning, where had that come from?), her skin was buzzing withâ€|fear? Probably. Not the dull ache of living in oppression, but the fatal jolts that threw off aim and fumbled trigger fingers. It was why she was sprinting when she really shouldn't have been.

There wasâ€|one of theâ€|_them_â€|ahead of her, she needed to stop. Intersection, dammit, no close buildings in front and the one behind was locked when she tried it. She turned left, scrambled back when she saw a fried headcrab limping along and shot off in the other direction. Her shoulders scraped against a brick wall when she stopped to breathe, and she found herself lost again. Was itâ€|left? Just around the corner, another skeletal heap of glass and mortar. With a bell. A church?

Keeping the gun close to her belly, she moved up against what looked like the most stable wall and tried to deaden her heart rate. Think of her objectives.

Footsteps. Loud footsteps.

She froze behind her insufficient cover and hoped he wouldn't turn around. Just keep walking, and don't turn around. Slowly, she pulled herself up to look, get a glimpse of the officer and see him half walking and half lolloping about like he was investigating some noise complaint and not hunting down two fugitives.

Noise complaint. Exploding building. Harhar.

Her vision was a little bleary, but the morning sharpened her perceptions, somewhatâ€|they caught a glint of metal from the object in his hand as he sauntered away. Metal, blood and wood. That wasn't a stun stick.

Wasâ€|was that her axe? Was the officer loafing around with her axe? She didn't even remember dropping it. He had seen her axe, lying out in the street somewhere, and just picked it up.

Okay, he wasn't paying much attention to his surroundings, it seemed. Maybe she could sneak past him. She could do that, right?

No, not...not really.

Trying to be as quiet as she knew how and feeling her arms and legs protest (Muscle control? She had been in a train crash yesterday. Blasphemy), she crouched down again and tried to maneuver as best she could out of his range of vision. So focused was she on this that the scuffling to her right didn't register until the noise was coming almost directly into her ear. She turned to look, absently, like it'd be a pigeon or something normal. A teacup pig, for all it mattered.

No, it was what Pen had called a houndeye. Houndeye with all the eyes, coming closer to her, like some deranged puppy dog. Unblinking, shiny eyes, right in her face--

She swiped out her foot and sent the thing sprawling. Which was a bad move because it squealed. Very loudly. Shuddering, it righted itself and scampered off, brainless and oblivious of the damage it had just caused. She cringed.

The white, ghoulisn face snapped around in her direction.

"**Hey!**"

Her mind blanked out in panic as he reached for the weapon hanging at his belt, she felt herself pull the trigger, doubling over as the shotgun slammed hard into her abdomen. When the intense pain died down and presence of mind to look up returned, the officer was gone—gone, dead, down, what was the difference?—in a slowly growing pool of blood, his radio blaring like a flatlining heart monitor.

Or was that the ringing in her ears? Maybe it was both. Gunshots were _loud_.

A mismatched, horrid feeling of joy uncurled in her stomach, and she quickly quelled it.

No, no, she would _not_ call murder fun. Never. It was a symptom of living under someone's boot, like a lot of the things that were currently wrong with her. Not healthy. Not therapeutic.

Stomach still lurching from the shotgun recoil and bile in her throat, she adjusting her grip and set off to find Pen. Her shoes splashed through some of the blood, and she pretended not to notice. Had she really spent a good chunk of yesterday with it smeared all over her face? Eugh.

Well. It had been her _own_ blood, which was marginally less disgusting.

It still looked like downtown, she thought she was going in the right direction. She passed by bloodstains on the walls—still wet and glistening. Escalating from that there was a corpse up ahead. Did that mean she should follow this street? Well, it was a headcrab zombie with the head still on. She should take that as a good sign. She could get good signs. Every once in a while. It wasn't _impossible_—

Giving out a frustrated sigh, her pace moved into a slow stroll. She peeked around every corner she came to for corpses and caught sight of a few smashed headcrabs. The path led up to rather well preserved town hall; she let the shotgun swing in her arms as she turned towards it. Another shot rang out, with the camera flash whine, her face twitched again, but she was still stuck in her strut.

There was no one inside. A few footprints on the floor, though. She lightly walked in the steps, feeling her muscles loosen up a little. Farther along, through the other side, to the backyard.

It was outside, but only for the lack of ceiling. High brick walls warded off trespassers, and a few disarmed, rigged up pistols aimed for her forehead. She ducked through, her feet sinking into the dug

up dirt.

Lauren took a breath, tightened and dropped her shoulders again, and saw those familiar strawberry blonde pink, bouncy curls. She didn't want to be so relieved, but there it was. Pen was fiddling with some control panel near horizontally placed steel doors that some idiot with a sniper rifle must've put down, moving in a flustered flurry and her hair all over the place.

"Hey there."

She whirled around, eyes flaring open "wow, Lauren didn't think they could get that wide-running over and locking her in a hug that knocked the air out of her lungs.

Recoiling slightly, she didn't know if she should pat her on the back or what, but Pen pulled away after a second and wiped her cheeks.

"Sorry," she half-mumbled, half nervously laughed. "I thought I'dâ€"y'know, abandoned you. To die."

Lauren blinked. "Your vote of confidence isâ€"inspiring?"

Pen snickered a little at that, sniffled, and turned back to the control panel. "I've almost got this set up. No one followed you right?"

"Noâ€" She didn'tâ€"think_ they hadâ€"Why be covert when you were better armed and better trained than the target?

"Good." Pen fiddled with a lever on the control panel, frowning. "Richard said there were two ways to open it; keysâ€"which, uh, he didn't give meâ€"and some, erâ€" She punched in a few buttons. "â€"combination I could use toâ€"to hack it. Almost got it."

"There's no rush." The words came out a little quickly. "I meanâ€"noâ€"no rush."

The doors popped open and Lauren's throat went dry. Pen gave her that look againâ€"not the odd one, the uncomfortably concerned one. "Are you going to be okay?"

Lauren tried to laugh that off, and it came out as a strangled chuckle. "Uh huh, yeah. Well, it'sâ€"it'sâ€" She was just going to have to deal with it. Not because of any backbone she might have gotten back, but because if there was one thing that she feared more it was getting caught. Or looking weak in front of strangers_. "Not a problemâ€" "

This was her life now. Yay for freedom and all that jazz.

To prove her dedication, Lauren took a stumbling step into the hole, steadying herself on the stairs down. Pen hopped in past her, clicking a switch and lighting up the way with flickering, broken lights, strung along with thin wires making tangled shapes over the walls.

It was terrible. It was so terrible. Pen made her way to a little red

button off to the side, probably to close off the path. Lauren fidgeted and looked back.

"Waitâ€"wait just a minuteâ€"|"

One last look at the skyâ€"one last look at rolling, puffy clouds lightly cloaking the sunlight, spreading pink shades of orange as the dawn ended and _oh God she was going to miss it so much she'd never see it again, she could see herself dying down here under incandescent bulbs and no one would care _not. A. One_. _

"Okay." Before she could change her mind.

Her chilly fingers curled around stinging shoulders, and as the opening slid shut she withdrew and tried to contain herself.

5. Everyone's Dead

****Sorry for the time delay. Had some file problems.****

* * *

><p>Any second now she was going to go running back, leave her skin behind and go dashing her bones to pieces on the wall.<p>

That wasâ€"actually a horrifying image. It made the ceiling falling on her seemâ€"not as bad in comparison. Well, she'd still be crushed to death, struggling for air.

Her chest was justâ€"tighteningâ€"|

Pen solemnly kept up the lead. Lauren thought about if being a fugitive involved a whole lot of situations like this. It made her wonder if this was actually any better than the civilian life she'd run from. But at least she wasn't dead. That was still a plus in her book.

Yeahâ€"|

And they weren't being watched. Well, while they were in a tunnelâ€"not to undermine how she was still struggling not to hyperventilate but all things considered, not being hounded by violent "policeman" and floating eye-bots and not being forced to listen to Breen talking all day was pretty good. It had been a while since she'd thought of the positives of running awayâ€"|

She was hungry again. The yawning emptiness inside her protested as the wall texture changed the farther they went, and she was convinced that she had begun to starve to death.

"H-hey." She called, picking up her pace a little to catch up with Pen, who had briskly pulled ahead. "Doâ€"Do we have any food?" Her voice sounded a bit too tentative to her ears.

Pen cocked her head as she looked back. "Of course we do. Give me some credit, I didn't leave without rations. Here." She unclipped a pouch from her belt and tossed it over to Laurenâ€"who proceeded to awkwardly juggle it in her hands long enough to look like some kind of idiot, and then, a little red faced, check its contents. Nothing

special, a few chunks of some suspicious looking meat and a few granola bars.

They had granola bars. A grin tugged at the corners of her mouth, and she struggled to hide it before Pen commented. They were probably stale, but what the hell. She peeled back the wrapper and bit down into the thick mass of granola and bitter chocolate chips, wincing a little. It was likeâ€|chewing tar. Except she'd never had tar. But that sounded right. She handed the pouch back to Pen, who accepted it back wordlessly and continued walking.

Very diligent, her new companion.

Busy managing the snack she was having and wondering how old it was, her mind was occupied enough to not tear itself to pieces. She almost missed the point where the environment changed; the walls were smootherâ€|these were water carved cavernsâ€|With glowing crystals at evenly placed intervals.

It didn't look right.

She noted some dimly lit holes along the upper portion of the wallsâ€|like little tunnels for creatures to nest in.

Her stomach turned. Halfway through her granola bar she decided that she didn't really feel like finishing it.

"It's kinda pretty down here." Pen said absently.

Lauren was feeling the onset of another panic attack, and braced herself against the wall, trying to control her breathing. She must not have done a good job, because she heard from up ahead, "â€|Are you okay?"

"YES, my lungs just-SPASM periodically because of all the beatingsâ€|" Wait, that sounded worse than claustrophobia. "I mean Iâ€|" Her voice choked. She hated it. What she wanted to do right then was make herself as small as possible, curl up in a little ball and just not move. Ever.

Something squishy and wriggly dropped down onto her head and started frantically pulling through her hair. She shrieked, everything in her arms clattering to the ground and Pen's footsteps echoing off the walls as she ran back.

"Ge-GET IT OFF. GET IT OFF." Unhelpfully, she thrashed about until her head smacked against the wall, and she collapsed to the floor making vague, scattered curses. Whatever it was fell off her head, but she couldn't see it, curling into a ball and clutching her scalp. She sifted her fingers through hair and searched for any punctures orâ€|or eggs.

"Wait-wait, Lauren, it's okay! It's okay!" she heard Pen say, her voice in some bizarre swing of girlish enthusiasm. "It's okay, it's just a chumtoad!"

A what?

Lauren peaked out from behind her fingersâ€|and brushed some of the hair that she'd been rooting through out of her faceâ€|to see a

small, purpleâ€¦ She would have said frog, but its legs were wrong, and it had one large, bulbous eye instead of two, there on its head like a fat, red dewdrop. It aimlessly, lazily flopped about, and with one scoop of her arms Pen plucked it off the ground.

"It's just a little chumtoad." She was giggling now, curls bouncing and looking every bit the stereotypical ditzy blond. Lauren found her laughter alarming. Not the least because it was contagious. At first she just knew that her lungs were shakingâ€"it took a second to recognize the noise that came out, it sounded more like she was gasping. Like an oppressive weight been choking her down, and she hadn't noticed until her breath had come bubbling up through her lungs again.

It was just a chumtoad.

She quit smiling when her cheeks started to hurt. It wasn't _that_ funny. Her face flushed.

The chumtoad had fallen back to the floor again, absolutely oblivious to everything going on around it and absently moving about around them.

"We must have hit a nesting ground," Pen said finally, catching her breath again. "Probably best to be careful, there might be more dangerous creatures in the tunnels up ahead."

Lauren nodded, grateful that she hadn't descended into hiccups, clambering for her shotgun. It figured their escape route would have a catch. Here's hoping there was a way around it without wasting all their ammo or losing an eye because she wasn't careful with her firearms.

They collected themselves and started back off, Lauren a bit more wary of their changing environment and no longer appreciative of the features that were surely from an alien planet, save for the apparent harmlessness of at least one of its creatures to the extent that Pen didn't find anything wrong with turning her back on it.

As they walked, she could hear resounding off the floor a few, irregularly placed, soft little splats of flesh. Was following them? Lauren turned around and looked down. Yes it was.

"Go away."

It hopped up against her foot and stared up at her with that glossy, dewdrop eye.

"Go on. Shoo. Vamoose."

Was that Spanish? It occurred to her addled mind that chumtoads, being from another dimension, were probably unfamiliar with Spanish.

Funny. She was certain that she had never seen one in her whole life, but something about that little purple frog wasâ€¦familiar. Comfortingly so, actually.

"What exactly does a chumtoad _do?_"

"Get eaten." The thing pulled itself onto her shoe and let its tongue loll out. "I'm serious, that's all they do. My mom and I—" Pen's voice cut off. She tried again. "They make good bullsquid bait."

Lauren slung her shotgun over her shoulder and bent down to pick the wriggly thing up, cradling it in her arms. It was kind of cute, for—whatever it was. "Do you think maybe we could hold onto it?"

Pen snorted. "If you want. It's eating your rations though."

"It's—it's not a _pet_." Lauren stammered.

"What is it then?"

Lauren waffled a bit with her reply before muttering out a string of gibberish. Pen laughed.

It wasn't a pet because she wasn't _naming_ it. Although, if she _was_ naming it, she already had the perfect name and everything—but no, _it_ wasn't a pet. The little creature was—what had Pen said? Bullsquid bait.

Although she didn't really like the idea of feeding Ribby to a bullsquid. She didn't even know what a bullsquid _was_, but she imagined it would look like a crime against nature and rip him to shreds. The thought wasn't appealing.

She wondered if she had ever had a pet before. The cloud over her mind had cleared more than she cared to see, but a lot of things still refused to move into her consciousness, and any experience whatsoever that she might have had in taking care of another living creature that was gone.

Aliens were the opposite of domestic though, so that wouldn't have mattered in the first place—

Not a pet. Not. A. Pet.

The crystals that lined the walls were slowly changing color, making small gradient changes towards red from yellow. Their space widened—not a bad thing—and little pools of some shimmery blue liquid were collected on the ground between thin crevices in the wall. Had that sniper bothered to come through here before recommending it to travelers? Maybe he'd given an indication of where it was going, but you'd think it was worth mentioning that an entire section not that far in looked like the universe had cut and pasted in a cave from an alien planet.

A lot of crazy things had happened since—well, she couldn't recall _exactly_ what happened in the First Days, but even living in a Union city allowed one to cling to some sense of normalcy among familiar architecture and a mainly humanoid populace. This was—well, she had a purple, one eyed toad in her arms, occasionally making croaking noises that were more akin to a pig squealing. And her human companion had pink hair.

Well. Pinkish blonde.

And all of this was much better to focus on than how the ceiling was getting closer to them. She didn't think it was her imagination because she could reach a hand up and brush her fingers over the smooth surface. Ribby was tiny, he and his kind probably didn't worry about cave-ins. Or getting stuck and starving to death.

"Hey Lauren?"

"What?" Conversation. Ribby was alternating between dopey, relaxed stillness and lightly kicking at her arm. He wasn't any good for conversation.

"What did you do before the Seven Hour War? â€¦If that's an okay question."

"What did I do?" This took her aback a little. "Uhâ€¦I think itâ€¦M-my memory's a little fuzzy on that front, but umâ€¦" Nobody had ever asked her that before, and the fact that she didn't know off the top of her head was suddenly a bit discomfiting. "I wasâ€¦it had to do with drinks."

"Drinks?"

"Yeah, like uhâ€¦oh shoot." This was going to kill her. "Whaddya call it, like aâ€¦"

"I mean, did you make drinks or somethingâ€¦"

Lauren snapped her fingers. "Waitress! Bar maid."

"Oh." Pen sounded disappointed.

â€¦It wasn't like that was the career she'd planned on keeping for the rest of her life_ or anything-What did it matter what she'd done for a living? "What about you? I mean, not-not before the War, but, beforeâ€¦wellâ€¦the wholeâ€¦trainâ€¦thing."

Pen swallowed. "Wellâ€¦Weâ€¦me and my family, we traveled around a bit. Mostly just trying to stay below the radar." She paused and pulled at her hair. "I'm notâ€¦sure I wanna talk about it."

"We could talk about the ceiling." Lauren offered. "I think it's dropped a-a foot or two. Have you ever seen anything like these crystal things? I'm not going to grow a third arm by standing near one, am I?"

Pen grinned. "No, but you might turn green."

She was joking. â€¦She was, wasn't she?

"That's a joke."

"Oh."

"It can't be too much farther." Pen mused, gazing at the surroundings thoughtfully. "They wouldn't be good escape tunnels if they didn't lead somewhere. Y'know, quickly."

"How quickly, do you think?"

"How am I supposed to know that?"

The air screeched. Pen paused a moment only to take the safety off of her rifle and Lauren almost jumped out of her skin.

* * *

><p>It figured.<p>

More of that hideous, screaming, bug noise. Where had her shotgun fallen?

Oh, there it was. A swift kick wasn't really enough to keep from getting scratched up but it pushed off the claws so she could reach-

Sure, nice tunnel, hidden from Civil Protection, pretty crystal displays, adorable toad-things just falling from the ceiling, sure, great escape route. As long as you don't mind the attacks from monstrous, four foot mantis things (Pen yelled "ant-lions", but they didn't look like ants to her) right when you've let your guard down.

Ribby, the cute, stupid little creature, was springing around from place to place, croaking in a panic and trying not to get slashed to ribbons. He knocked into a few of their antennae, disoriented them for a good kick when Lauren could get one in between hyperventilated gasps.

This tunnel was too small to fight ant-lions in.

She fired, and the buckshot hit dead onâ€"spraying over the walls, ricocheting off the stone and booming into Lauren's eardrums so all she could catch was ringing.

Tunnel acoustics, right, very bad idea.

She had been standing there, breathing hard with her shotgun falling out of her arms and more blood caking over her face for she didn't know how long when a red-smeared hand tapped her arm.

"They're dead. We have to hurry before more show up."

Lauren gave a start. Her hearing had come back. Pen looked like hell, and Ribby was croaking like he had chronic hiccups.

"This normal for you?" she breathed, scrabbling with slippery fingers on her gun.

"Only if we go underground." Pen leaned down and picked up Ribby.
"They have a nest, farther in."

"I'm never going underground again."

"I understand."

There was no glorious light at the end, but there were little flickering lightbulbs and a trapdoor, which was good enough. Lauren almost skinned herself stumbling up the stairs, knocking her head on

the metal before Pen had a chance to push the release button.

She shot her a dirty look before she could get in more than a few snickers.

To her abject dismay, what awaited them was just another enclosure, falling ceiling tiles and broken light rods. No windows, sealed door.

"_What?!_" She shrieked, ducking her head down and stumbling out of the hole and onto the floor. "I came all this way to die _here_? Why couldn't the antlions have gotten me first?!"

"Calm down." Pen said, coming up behind her. "There has to be a way out of here."

"That'sâ€"easyâ€"for you to say!"

"It's easy logic, Lauren." She rapped her fist on the big steel door. It creaked inward, for a fraction of an inch. "Theyâ€"kept it unlocked?"

"You mean you expected them to _lock us in_?" Lauren asked, stumbling to her feet.

"Well, until they knew we weren't gonna _kill _anyoneâ€"|"

"I don't care. They left it unlocked. I'm getting out of hereâ€" "

Bodies. _Everywhere_.

Lauren jumped back, missed the door, tried to push herself through the wall. They were so close to her, corpses with blood and slashed flesh, lying there like they could get up any minute and crowd her with _the stench of death_.

"What happened _here_â€"?" Pen breathed, taking two steps forward. "I mean this-this is kind of _sickening_."

Notably, Pen was not the one gasping for breath and hoping she didn't vomit.

Most of them were men and woman in combat fatigues, jury rigged armor and yellow lambda insignias on their arms. Some others were soldiers in gas masksâ€"identical and in black bulletproof vests. They looked more like broken mannequins with pure white skin and clear fluids leaking from their wounds instead of blood. Some horrible dolls that had been sent in to kill and left behind by their fellows.

"You mean it's not obvious?" Lauren squeaked, trying to iron the fear out of her voice. "The Union came through and _killed everyone_."

"I know _that_. _Calm down_." Pen ordered, beckoning for her to get up with her rifle. She pointed over to Ribby, who had started cheerfully bypassing the piled people with his extraordinary jumping skills. "You see? Even your chumtoad isn't scared, and his kind gets eaten by _everyone_."

"But he doesn't have brains!" Lauren snapped. "Of course he isn't

scared! _Why would they eat him if he didn't have brains?_"_

Pen shook her head. "You have clearly lost your mind. Let's get you into some fresh air. Do you see the door? That door leads outside. Let's go."

"Wait. What if outside is _worse_"

She threw up her hands in exasperation. "Then stay here."

Well, that was not a real option. She stuck close to Pen, realized that she'd dropped her shotgun and thought about going back for it. Through the corpses. Decided not to.

The exit was a beaten wooden door, and it swung open like it was about to fall right off its hinges. The state of the sky said it was afternoon. Maybe late afternoon. Not many plants, and mostly crushed grass.

"â€|A lot of dead people." Lauren observed.

"That's great." Pen muttered. "We find a Resistance post and everyone in it is dead."

Ah. The surviving militants. "That who they were?" Lauren peered at them closer. She thought about the encircled lambdas on the half the walls in every city she saw, graffiti nobody had bothered to scrub away. She'd figured it wasn't important if the Union didn't fear it enough to hide it from everybody else. Just a bunch of people who thought they could make a difference and still failed to actually save anyone. Even themselves, apparently.

"Mom and Dad always talked about joining upâ€|We could never find an active outpost thoughâ€|" Pen kicked at one of the dead doll soldiers. "Just a bunch of houndeyes and rogues."

Lauren kept quiet. She'd keep her disparaging opinions to herself.

Ribby knocked against her leg and she looked down. The pudgy thing was shivering a little. Could normal reptiles shiver? Whatever. She scooped him back into her arms and tried to ignore the slight chill in the wind.

"They might have left something useful in the base." Pen mused. "The Combine have already swept through here so they won't come back; it might be a good place to stay for the night."

"Do we really have to stay in the base filled with corpses?"

"I'm sure we can find a room that's empty."

Lauren sighed. "You're lucky I'm exhausted."

Pen put on a lopsided smirk and rolled her eyes. "Yes, I suppose so."

It wasn't particularly well stocked, but there were enough supplies in the base to make it a passable living space. The abundance of bodies in the outpost was a matter of great concern to the both of them, so it was pretty nice to find a spot where there weren't any heavy corpses to lug out. It was cold, though; as the day started to wind down, it began to cool into downright uncomfortable levels. Lauren didn't really mind—well, she did, but by now had learned not to complain about the lack of heating in her living spaces. That usually earned a stern glare and a smack on the spine. Pen, though, had no compunctions about trying to fix the situation, and set off to find the generator and figure out why their portable heater wasn't working.

She had yet to come back.

Maybe Lauren should have gone with her.

Now that she wasn't drinking Union water, it was easier to remember herself without devolving into confused gibbering.

Before their occupation, she might've lived somewhere warm. It was always air conditioning that had been the problem, breaking down, freezing her arms. Now she was somewhere farther north where the weather liked to change on some whim of the malevolent forces that had taken over humanity's fate. When she grew used to the cold, the sun would burn the air, when she grew used to the heat, whole apartment blocks would freeze over.

But she'd take a desert over the Arctic Circle any day, honestly.

She was half to her feet when she heard a brief yelp, followed by the bars of the heater beginning to glow a burning red. This encouraged her to sit back down and wait more patiently. Pen returned after a while, a small instrument that looked like a tazer in her hand and her hair frizzed out in every direction that wasn't occupied by her face and neck.

"I got it running," was all she said.

"Oh. That's good." Lauren looked down at Ribby, stifling her snickers because that wouldn't be nice "I like your hair, by the way."

"Well good, I spent a lot of time on it this morning." Pen eased herself off her feet, on the opposite side of their heat source, the light playing off her bad complexion. "You feeling better?"

Right. Because she'd had a freak out moment back there. "No, I'm—" "I'm fine. Are you feeling better?"

Pen shrugged. "A little. I think it'd be nice to get some sleep. I didn't rest a whole lot back at the town. I had to keep an eye on the—" "Richard."

"The Richard."

"—|Yes."

"That must have been boring."

"A little bit. I mean heâ€"he didn't do anything strange, but he also seemed a bitâ€"Cold. I think he shot that zombie just for the target practice." Pen looked down at her shoes, and Lauren wanted to say that she had the same feeling. "â€"We talked a little. He was pretty enthusiastic about his sniper rifle modifications. I talked a little bit about my-my family." She hesitated, then looked up with the red glare of bars in her eyes. "Do you think they're dead now?"

Lauren opened her mouth, closed it, and rolled the answer around in her mind. If not, they probably wished they were. â€"That was probably the wrong thing to say. "I wouldn't be hoping for anything else. Not with the Union involved."

"Right." Her face briefly contorted, and then she glanced up, expression blank. "Why do you call them that?"

"What, the Union?"

"Yeah."

"It's better than 'Our Benefactors', isn't it?" Pen looked at her blankly. "It'sâ€"never mind. I heard someone call it the Universal Union once, that's all."

"Really? That doesn't soundâ€"I don't know, a little unpatriotic to call the source of everyone's problems _the Union_?"

Lauren gave her a flat stare. "America is dead."

"That's a bit defeatist."

"_We were invaded by aliens_."

"TouchÃ©."

"Anywayâ€" The heat was making her drowsy. Her lids flickered lazily over her eyes. "I think we need to sleep. It feels like tomorrow is going to beâ€"stressful."

"There will probably be lots of running involved." Pen agreed. "I think I have a few ideas about our next move, though. Sleep on it."

"The only thing I'm sleeping on is this crappy mattress," Lauren muttered, curling up and hoping she fell unconscious before something came in to kill them. She almost had a heartattack when her chumtoad wriggled from his spot by her feet so he could nestle into her arms, but she made do.

7. Rather Eat Squid

Lauren could hear the TVs flitting through her brain when she tried to open the door to the outside. Mostly Breenâ€"the same message over and over, how humanity needed this fate, generic Quisling bull; she'd heard it so many times she could recite it in her sleep. Her hands slipped over the brass knob like they'd been greased.

One or two of the voices was a news report, talking about how Black Mesa had been nuked, and then about the strange things that were

appearing in major cities around the world and then going black, repeating ad nauseum. The more she struggled to open the door, the harder the voices pressed in, until she felt herself pop and wake up in a marching procession.

Seemed a cliché setting for a dream.

It felt like she always had this one, walking with people who looked exactly like her towards something they couldn't see. Marching over glass, feeling it imbed in the skin but no pain.

Somebody tapped her shoulder and she turned, trying hard to recognize the face.

She couldn't.

She picked up her gun and started to kill as many of them as she could.

When Lauren woke up with a shattered gasp, Pen was gone.

That little fact made her sit straight upright, through drug-like REM paralysis and protesting ligaments. She hated waking up, she hated it so much. Ribby flopped off where he'd settled on her stomach, chirping in alarm. There was no sunlight yet, which made her suspect that she'd only been asleep for a few hours. So where was Pen?

Trembling a little, she cautiously got to her feet. The heater was off. Should she call out? Maybe she was just in the next room getting some water or somethingâ€|

Don't be stupid, Lauren. Always assume the worst. Best option in the cities when people went missing. Of course, that involved accepting it and doing nothing about it. Which was not something she was doing _here_.

A large crash came from somewhere in the complex.

Panic time, panic time.

Where was her gun? Had she dropped it when they got out of the tunnel? Damn it, why didn't she keep track of her things? Her eyes scanned the room, and she eventually settled for a jagged piece of debris. It probably wasn't going to be much use, and unless she was going to deal with anything that caused knee-jerk reactions like zombies she might not have the nerve to stab anything with it, but it filled the empty space in her hand and that should be enough to stop the hyperventilating so that whatever it was wouldn't hear her breathing and _speaking_ of breathingâ€|

She needed to stop muttering her thoughts under her breath.

Blearily, concerned that she wasn't going to get any more sleep, Lauren crept down the hallway. Her attempt at covert caution was a little dampened by the little slap slap slap of Ribby hopping along the linoleum floor.

Maybe she should rethink this pet thing. "Scoot, Ribs. I don't wanna

step on ya."

He ignored her. She considered drop-kicking him. More crashes stole back her attention, and she picked up the pace. The complex was difficult to navigate, but the confusion was mitigated a little because of how easy it was to recognize the corpse configuration in each room. Eventually, she found herself in a lobby-like area, with Pen rifling through the bodies of Union soldiers, rifle in hand, and picking out small packs of ammo. She turned with a start, and relaxed when she saw Lauren.

"I'm sorry," she said, bending down to pick up a pistol at the feet of one of the dead rebels. "I thought you could use some sleep. And then I realized that this was an emergency, and I couldn't make my way back.

"Emergency?" Lauren's small bit of pride at being able to find her way around the building better than Pen died when she dropped the pistol that was tossed to her. "What is it? What's going on?"

"Bullsquids." Pen's expression was narrowed, concerned. "Security breach, I'm guessing. Leftover hole."

_BULLsquids? _"This is fantastic. We never had to deal with 'bullsquids' in the city," Lauren muttered.

"No," Pen conceded, "The Combine keeps away all pests. And those pesky human rights that everybody's complaining about."

"â€|Point taken."

"We're not as safe here as I thought. So I guess we need to start making plans now."

"Plans?"

"Any thoughts?"

Lauren froze while her brain attempted to reach reasoning functions above survival. "Okayâ€|Can't stay hereâ€|I don't know how bad bullsquids are, but I don't think I'd be all that great at dealing with them. And there aren't any more apartments for you to blow up."

"Ha ha."

"And neither of us knows the area, so we'd be walking blind if we just decided to run, is that right?"

"â€|Not necessarily. The Reâ€|" The door splintered open. What entered was, presumably, a bullsquid.

Such a name didn't seem to cover the monstrosity that charged at the both of them with a savage fury, but what else could you call a hunched, bipedal, spotted beast with a mass of tentacles in the front of its face?

"_What is __**that**_?!"

"Weren't you _listening_? It's aâ€" The sound of Pen's rifle going off drowned out the next few seconds of noise. The bullsquid faltered for a moment, then roared and started to charge, yellow goo leaking from its side. Lauren yelped and jumped back, frantically trying to aim and blasting off a round. Somehow, the bullet snapped into its eye, and the creature flopped down, dead. Maybe she was a crackshot or just lucky. It slid into Pen's feet with the remainder of its momentum.

"Oh, um, good, you got it. Let's go. I have an idea."

Pen led the way, swiftly but edged with caution. Lauren followed, checking her gun as best she could.

â€|Yep, this was a gun all right.

"Will I be able to hear this idea?" she said after a minute of plodding through corridors and listening for the crash of hunting cephela-cattle.

Pen glanced back. "As soon as I figure out how to find the exit we went through yesterday. Y'know, this building is a lot bigger than it seemed when we first came inâ€" "

"It's that way." Lauren pointed through a set of double doors, the windows broken on one of them. "I remember, because this is how the corpses were arranged when we first came in through the tunnel. It was practically a straight walk through to get outside."

"â€|Oh." Pen fidgeted. "Well, that's good thinking, Lauren."

That was a compliment. How does one usually react to compliments?

"â€|Thank you?"

Thumping noises echoed from beyond the room, possibly from an adjacent hallway. They both riveted their attention to where it echoed in front of them, instead of behind them where another bullsquid came roaring out of the vents.

Pen turned around first, and wrenched Lauren around by the shoulder. It looked at them somewhat expectantly, like one of them was just going to go jumping inside its mouth. They both fired on it and the thing went down quickly, peppered full of holes. Then the other one came out from the direction they'd been looking at and hocked a loogie at them.

Lauren had enough alien horror movie knowledge accumulated to know when to duck. It missed them both and splattered harmlessly over the floor behind them.

Harmlessly. Yeah. She had to look when it started sizzling. The goo was eating through one of the mannequin corpses.

Acid. These things spat ACID. It was green and smelled like laser gum surgery as it began on the floor, and given how that's where she'd been standing a moment ago they weren't bad at aiming it, either.

Kneejerk reaction time. Her pistol jammed as she brought it up to bear, the lack of recoil stiffening her arm. The bullsquid advanced,

probably angry about having its life threatened in such a manner because it had _dignity _dammit andâ€

She whacked it with the gun, and surprised herself by drawing the yellow blood from its thick hide. The thing howled in pain and thrashed against her, smacking her diaphragm and forcing all of the air out of her lungs. Lauren responded with choked gasps, and Pen responded with a high caliber shot to its eyeball.

"Pen, you're a real crackshot." She managed, fiddling with the faulty gun.

Pen gave her that look again. "I'm a what?"

"Itâ€"never mind, let's get going."

Not wanting to push her luck in case more came along, she gripped her pistol tight with one hand and scooped fear struck Ribby into her arms with another. She didn't need either of them tripping over him when the running began.

* * *

><p>Some wonderful idiot left a roofless jeep outside that anybody could just jump in and hotwire. Lauren felt a small twinge of pride that _that _particular skill belonged to her, although when it came down to it Pen had the steadier hand at driving the thing. After a few minutes of exhilaration she realized that this was the first time she'd been in a proper car in years, and grinned at the vaguely wooded, hilly scenery that was passing by at the perfect, blurry rate. She squeezed Ribby to her chest, and he panicked just a little bit more, trying to squirm out of her grip.

"This is fun."

Pen didn't take her eyes off the road. "You have a strange idea of fun."

"It's driving, there's nothing weird about driving."

"I think it's weird."

Lauren forced a scowl and looked around at the scenery. "â€|You're a better driver than I was at your age."

"Oh yeah?" Pen swerved a bit sharply around a passing houndeye, throwing Lauren into the side door.

"RUDE."

"You sound _really _tired," she laughed. "Look, you can sleep in the seat if you want, I promise I'll try to drive smoothly."

"M'kay." Maybe when she woke up, she'd be in another apartment. Third-ish day on the run and things were finally starting to make some semblance of sense to her. "Just let me know when weâ€"

The ground exploded under them and almost sent the car into a careening tumble. Pen screamed and Lauren almost fell out, clutching at the seat and looking around wildly. The teen quickly reoriented

the jeep, getting all four wheels back on the dirt road's surface and slamming her foot down on the break.

The air was quiet for about a minute. "Was that a mine, or are we being shot at?"

Lauren coughed and said, sounding more confused than plagued with the stark terror driving away her tiredness. "What the hell is that thing in the sky, Pen?"

She immediately started the jeep up again, throwing herself around in the seat as if that would make the car move faster. "Come on, come on, come on!"

The only synths that really ever came through the city were Striders, although Lauren sometimes saw the drop-ships hovering overhead. The bizarre mashing of flesh and machine, though she'd never thought of them as anything other than the threats they were meant to be. This one hummed and looked like a giant, green bug in the sky with an industrial fan in its tail, lazily floating along as it lined up the gun on its belly at the small dot that was their jeep.

"Peeeee!"

For a moment, she thought the right tire had exploded in a ball of fire, but as they careened through the flying dirt their speed didn't drop. Ribby wriggled down from her arms and burrowed under the seat, screeching through the slight ringing in her ears. What if she got some kind of hearing damage from all of this?

Pen cursed and floored the accelerator. "_Munitions_. In the trunk. _Now_, Lauren!"

"Right, right." She turned around and crawled to the back, getting another glimpse of the synth in the air, a bit of its glowing blue underbelly visible as it bore down on them. "But, uh, I don't know what kinda guns can handle _that_." There was an old tree near the path, standing tall like some proud survivor of a genocide, or stubborn remnant of an exodus, the leaves starting to crinkle and brown. It exploded as they passed by. "Honestly, unless what we have is some kind of _bazooka_"

Oh.

"Did you know there was a rocket launcher in here?"

"Lauren just _fire_ it, this thing can kill us very easily."

She caught the next missile whistling in her ears before it whizzed right by her nose and hit a few feet from the path.

"More more more more more, always _more_," she grumbled, scrabbling for the gun and grunting as the car bounced and socked her in the stomach. Her head twisted and she caught view of some ruins, what looked like an old town that had been destroyed for some reason or another. "_Ahhhhhhh_, Pen, cover-turn _right_."

"I _know_ how to drive!"

When the jeep swerved the rocket launcher slid from her fingers and fell back into its case. The thing was heavy. She snarled and tried again as they slowed, maneuvering through the debris and structural skeletons of old buildings. As the bug started firing again she started getting showered with plaster and almost received a severe head wound as a chunk of brick fell past. An old church got in the crossfire, and the sound of its bell falling was the most glorious noise she'd ever heard. Lauren loaded the ammo and balanced the gun on her shoulder.

"How do I aim this thi-?"

"Scope, scope, SCOPE." The monster started changing tack, switching to machinegun fire while they were in the maze of cover to avoid wasting the heavy ammo. A few bullets pinged along the car, denting the metal and putting the final nail in the paintjob's coffin.

It was hard to aim while they were on the move. She took a minute to line up the red dot in the center of her vision with the creature in the sky, took in a big breath to steady herself, and fired

The recoil actually wasn't as bad as she'd been expecting from her experience with the shotgun, but of course, that was because a massive wave of ****fire**** shot out the end in its place. Thankfully it had been aimed out the edge of the car and not at Pen, or her friend would have ended up a pile of charcoal. Would have been nice to know that little detail beforehand. A moment passed and she stopped laughing in a mix of fear and exhilaration from firing off a rocket, and she watched as the bug gazed at it like it was an annoying bug and blasted it to pieces before it hit its mark

"Damn it." She scrambled to reload, Pen taking the brokenly paved street out of what was once a downtown and into a vaguely wooded area. Trees started falling as they dropped in and out of visibility, though they never lost sight of the synth. "Okay, let's try this againâ€¦!"

The heat rolled away from her in a thick cloud, and she watched the little rocket speed toward its target again. Her breath caught, the gun in the synth's belly visibly warming up and the head turning as it drifted away from it, more a question of how fast either one was and how well such a war amateur could actually aimâ€¦"

"Ohmygod I HIT IT I HIT IT!" She let out a loud whoop of excitement as the bug staggered in its flight path, small bursts of fire from where the rocket had struck its casing and cracked it. She turned back and shared a smile with Pen, before the ground in front of them burst into a cloud of dirt and rocky shrapnel, cracking the windshield and breaking a rearview mirror clear off. It was still alive and it was still firing.

Lauren went for another rocket and realized that she'd dropped the launcher, and it had fallen into the back of the truck for Ribby to start glomming onto it, eye wavering with fear. She bit her lip and gave him an affectionate, hopefully comforting squeeze with her hands, and he relaxed enough for her to start fumbling with her weapon again.

The missiles seemed to be coming at a faster rate as they slowly ran out of trees to hide behind while they progressed on the path, but

they broke open before even reaching the ground. If it wasn't for their more advanced speed without as much to move around, they probably would have been killed by the raining shrapnel and concussive fire. It was hard to aim while you were curling up into a ball at every blast.

Steeling her nerve, while Pen started to cuss in some vocabulary that she didn't even know the girl _had, _Lauren reared the gun back and tried to align the dot with the erratically flying, firing green alien while crouching on the backseat floor.

It started to crack and burst in flames, falling off its path and crashing through maybe a hundred yards of trees, out of sight. Threat gone, Pen spun the car and ground it to a halt, face splitting with a grin and giving her a nod. "Nice shot, Lauren!"

Lauren frowned and stared at where it had been in the air. "I didn't fire that. Did it just explode? All of a sudden? That's anticlimactic. Really really anticlimactic."

Pen shook her head. "No, no, Combine gunships don't just explode after one rocket. It usually takes, maybe, three? If you didn'tâ€"

"Well, hey there ladies!" Lauren's stomach dropped. The two of them turned to see where the car had stopped, and they saw a couple of men in a battered, tan truck, bazooka slung across the side as if they were trying to say, "Yeah, that's right, we did that."

One of them, wearing combat fatigues and a smarmy grin hopped out of their truck like it was a shiny red convertible and kicked a boot back to hit the door before striding over to where they sat in the jeep. "Aren't you two lucky we happened to be in the area?"

With this encroaching, familiar feeling of doom, Lauren figured there was _some _kind of luck involved.

* * *

><p>Bear with me-this chapter is newly written, and hasn't gone through the first revision yet.

8. Processed Cheese

**For those of you that have reviewed, thank you so much. It means a lot to know there are people reading this who like it. I can't promise to be consistent with updates or revisions, but I will try to make this a good story for you. -And a finished one.
â€|Eventually.**

* * *

><p>The sun was starting to burn on her face, so she kept her eyes down. The man was more interested in talking to Pen, anyway, speaking brightly though from where she sat Lauren could see a hole or two in his toothy smile.<p>

She'd forgotten how horrible it was to talk to people. _Other _people. Strangers. Lauren had thought that maybe because Pen had

been a stranger and they ended up having some weird kind of rapport after a few days then that meant her social skills were slowly recovering from her time in the cities. But the familiar anxiety and loathing had started to choke her chest and she felt like spitting.

The smarm-master's companion sat in the truck, looking over the two of them warily. He was younger, maybe just a little older than Pen, but there was an undeniable weariness to his eyes that implied more misery than most lifetimes should carry. Maybe she should wave. See if they could be grouches together.

â€|But hang on, that would ruin the point, wouldn't it?

"My name is Ken." The other one, the cheerful one, was making an effort to address both of them at once, but his glance seemed to deflect off of Lauren's eyes and bounce back to Pen. "I'm guessing you ladies both have names, right?"

"No."

Pen and Ken (hha hha, Pen and Ken) turned to stare in her direction.

"My exceedingly cheerful friend here is Lauren. I'm Pen." Pen appeared for that sentence almost like a typical teenager, embarrassed by her mom. â€|But that wasn't really a heartening thought because Lauren probably was at that age where she would have a teenage daughter to embarrass but didn't. "Weâ€"

Ken laughed, as if his own name wasn't ridiculously similar. "Pen? As in, like, an enclosure for farm animals?"

"Writing utensil." Lauren snapped, annoyed.

"ANYWAY," she coughed nervously and played with her pink curls, "We were on a train to City 23 when it was derailed and we made a break for it. Actually we were kind of hoping we'd-

"I wasn't." The words came out faster than Lauren could think twice about saying them. I don't want to help people, nope. She winced, slightly, glancing a little over at Pen. But the girl's disapproving glare had been short lived enough that she only caught the tail end of it.

"We were kind of hoping, actually, that we might run into some members of the Resistance. â€|That's what you are, right?"

"You're trying to be funny, right?" Ken laughed and grinned, turning to display a dark armor plate strapped to his arm with a dripping orange lowercase lambda. "Humanity's best hope, y'know?"

Lauren bit her tongue and said nothing. She looked around the vehicle, running her hands around the crevices that damage had opened up, and found Ribby, crouched under one of the seats and shivering. She pulled him out with a pop, holding him in her arms and it helped her nerves.

"Chumtoad. Cute." She glared at Ken, and he took a breath, returning to Pen. "So, this is sort of against protocol to just randomly pick

up pedestrians, but seeing as how you were being shot at just now me and Don could probably make an exception."

Lauren raised her voice a bit and called out to the other guy in the truck. "Hi Don!"

He perked up, looking at Lauren as if he hadn't noticed that the car had even stopped. After a moment he gave a small, hesitant wave.

"We've got a bunker nearby." Ken frowned over at their battered car. "You're welcome to join us if you like, there's enough room in the truck. Pretty sure I'm gonna end up insisting anyway."

"Oh, great, we get to hang out in their bunker," Lauren muttered. Pen slapped her arm and she rolled her eyes.

"Gladly."

"Great!" Ken began to walk back while Don set his gun down and slid into the driver's seat. "I bet it'll be nice to have a proper roof over your heads. It's not a main base or anything but it's a good place to keep an eye on the area and take in new recruits. â€"Not that you have to, or anything, I mean it's good for protecting people tooâ€"|"

People had become so irritating to her.

Lauren clutched Ribby closer and he wriggled again, settling into a better position with his eye slightly distorting from the pressure. She ended up a half step behind Pen, who was carrying the box of supplies from their trunk over, and asked impulsively. "Who says we need protecting by you guys and your little group?"

Ken's smile dropped for a moment, although she was pretty sure that didn't mean anything. "Did you not see that synth falling to the ground in a cloud of fire and broken armor? Trust me, we know what we're doing."

"We loosened it up for you," she growled under her breath. Pen snickered.

* * *

><p>The ride back was short and relatively uneventful. Dust billowed out behind the tires like a smoke signal but no synths came to shut up Ken's chatter. Eventually it became a tuneless hum as Lauren stared sleepily into the thickening trees, dying, dead, scared and petrified with sacks of tongue and teeth clinging to the stronger branches.<p>

At least Pen seemed to be getting along well. Lauren figured there weren't many people she could talk to about refugee lifeâ€"the incredibly mundane aspects of it that no one who didn't already go through them cared about. Rounding up bullsquid, headcrab hunting, attempting to breed domestic livestock so that Earth staples didn't go completely extinct.

It was much more boring than it should have been, so Lauren did her best to not pay attention. Don was just as quiet, and she figured

that even though he might be a total jackass he wasn't talking right then and that scored points in her book. He didn't even seem to be there, mentally. His body was swaying slightly from side to side, like he had a song in mind or was eager to start walking. She couldn't remember the last time she had heard a song. Or wanted to walk.

By the time they finally reached their destination, a rusting bunker half underground built into a large hill, her hair was a messy tangle on her head from the wind. That wouldn't have been a problem except as it stood she was the only one affected by it. Don and Ken had short hair and when Pen's hair got tangled it looked nice.

Scowling, she occupied her time straightening out the strands while Ken talked them through the gate and into the compound. It wasn't particularly impressiveâ€”she figured it acted more as a highlight for the area than a way of warding off Union forces, but then, she wasn't an expert in guerilla tactics. None of the people milling about, setting up equipment and using shoddily put together firing ranges, seemed surprised to see them. Maybe they got tons of beat up lifeless people in every day? There were a few friendly waves. She liked to think that her dead stares drove them off, but it was mostly them returning back to their business.

They quickly came up to what looked like a make-shift parking lot. There were other cars lined up in what appeared to be rows made of methodically strewn garbage. Lauren's expression took a quick twist in disgust at the dead grass and wildflowers underneath, before she rubbed her eyes and decided not to care right then. A sandy haired (girl? It was so hard to tell from a distance) was waiting for them, and while Lauren squinted she waved over at Ken.

"HR wants to have a word with you two," she called out as they pulled in, sidestepping a bit to keep from being run over. "â€”For the last four hours, might I add."

Ken paused as he got out of the car, glancing briefly over at Don as she strode off to do whatever job she had on the compound. "Oh, rightâ€”well, uh, you two just keep on towards the green door over there, knock a few times and we'll get you all set up, alright?"

"Bye Ken." Pen waved, smiling (a faltering, unsteady smile of being in an unfamiliar place without their promised official guide). She turned and offered that smile to Lauren, who suddenly felt offended that she was a secondary go-to for support and not the primary one. She kept her face neutral and turned in the direction that he had pointed, Ribby making his best effort to make it to the top of her head. She pulled him down.

The green door was on a separate building, still large but not quite so much as the bunker. It was dented and smeared with dry yellow fluid around the base, as if a couple of paintballs had exploded at someone's feet. There was a thin strip at eye levelâ€”presumably like the ones in secret mafia style meeting buildings that you read about in cheap fiction.

She blinked. She couldn't remember reading any of that, but the image was there in her consciousness.

Lauren raised her fist and, thinking of the last two days, pounded on the metal a bit harder than she should have considering the fact that she was made of flesh and blood. The bang bang bang was not nearly as satisfying as it should have been as she tried to covertly clutch her battered hand and wince in pain. After what felt like an eternity of waiting (as in, about two minutes), the thin strip slid open and they found themselves looking into two deep brown irises.

"What's the password?" The narrow pair of eyes demanded.

Pen balked. "Passworâ€”We're _refugees_, how are we supposed to know the password?"

"Alright, alright." The slot slid shut, and a man with shaved black hair and two fingers missing pulled the door open. "I've just always wanted to say that."

"You and everybody else stationed at a door with a sliding panel." Lauren muttered under her breath, keeping her eyes down as they walked past him. Immediately she was overcome with feelings of being crowded and contained. The building might have been large on the outside, but the hallways were not, and it didn't feel to her like there was enough space to walk in even in this bright lobby. Like she would smash into something if she wasn't careful. Or it would smash into her. She could hear the roof _creak._

There was a bald woman sitting on a couch, honest to god _knitting, _who looked up, brow creasing slightly. "â€”Are you alright? You seem a little jumpy."

Lauren tried to bite in her reply but she stammered and fidgeted and eventually the only thing that came out was a quiet, "It's justâ€”kind of small in here."

Pen made an awkward comforting gesture to her shoulder and that just made everything about a million times worse.

"You'reâ€”here for registry, right?" The lady smiled and it was oddly not reassuring.

"We're here to register, yes. Where would that be?" Pen spoke quickly, as if to cut off Lauren, who hadn't even been thinking of piping up.

There was that smile again, the odd pull of facial muscles to bare her teeth and nothing going on with her eyes. Like looking at a suspected spy stumbling out of an interview room with several bruises and a medically induced rictus. "Go down the hallway here, first room on the right. There's no door."

"Great," Pen nodded, averting her eyesâ€”good, so it creeped her out tooâ€”and taking Lauren by the hand (before Lauren snatched her hand _back). _"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

Lauren hummed in the back of her throat and they set off. As it happened the first room on the right was after several, _several _rooms on the left, and they arrived just in time to nearly slam themselves into a tall woman in a very dirty lab coat who was leaving

in a hurry. She frowned and gawped at them like they were aliensâ€”Lauren in fact had forgotten all about the chumtoad that had climbed his way up to her headâ€”until Pen said "Registry. We're here for the, umâ€”"

"Would it kill them to send some kind of notice when they pick up recruits?" The woman pinched the bridge of her nose, and Lauren took note of the greyed hair in a bun, the sharp features, and frown lines allll over her face.

Not to judge by appearances or anything.

"Come inside then, I have time for a couple of questions." She gestured for them to enter the room, pressing a green button on the wall as she slipped inside, herself. As they followed she pulled out a drawer and got a clipboard, looking around in bemusement for the pencil or pen and setting her mouth into a thin line when Pen (ho ho ho) produced one.

"I don't have all day. Let's get started." She ripped off the top sheet on her clipboard. After a slight pause while she frowned down at the tiny black letters she made a small nod to Pen.

"Name."

"Pen." Almost immediately. Lauren felt like she was shrinking.

"_Full _name."

Pen sighed and clutched at her upper arms. "Penvellyn Davis."

Lauren gave a start. "_What? _I thought your name was _Penelope_."

Penvellyn glanced over at her, something like annoyance or embarrassment in the way her eyes moved. "Yes, well, my name is Penvellyn. Is that going to make it hard for you to sleep at night? Was your entire perception of me built around that guess? No? No?"

Lauren raised her hands in surrender, trying to keep from smiling and doing only an okay job. "I'm just wondering why you would want to hide it under a cheap nickname, that's all."

"Can we just keep calling me 'Pen', please?"

"_May we continue?" _The woman turned her steel gaze and clutched clipboard to Lauren. "Name."

She found herself almost stating her full name, number, and transfer code. Context. But she caught herself in time, and instead briefly bit her tongue and decided this was not an institutional situation but a social one, and she could play by whatever rules she wanted to, dammit. "Lauren."

The iron lady glared up at her for repeating Pen's mistake. "**Full **name."

She sighed, not because she particularly hated her name but because she didn't like this woman and wanted to aggravate her in as passive

a fashion as she could. "Lauren Mallory."

"And your last name is _Mallory_?"

Lauren shot her a wild glare and Pen immediately backed off from whatever imitation she was doing of Lauren's earlier outburst. "I just think that's a nice last name."

"It means, 'ill-fated'."

"Oh."

"I was getting it changed." She frowned and drew her fingers through her hair. "I _think_ I was getting it changed. I remember papers and a replacement surname and"

"Please tell me which city you were assigned to last."

Pen and Lauren looked at each other for a moment, almost a contest over who should speak first since no names were called. Pen turned back. "I, uh, actually wasn't officially relocated, I was captured and on my way to be processed"

"Very good." And there was the irritating scratch of ink going on the paper. "And you?"

Lauren rolled her eyes up for a moment. "Well, I was _between _City 9 and 23 so _technically_"

"That will be it for now," the woman interrupted once more, clicking her pen. "We're occupied with other matters at the moment, so until we have someone available your evaluations will have to wait."

"What, mental evaluations?" Lauren scoffed. "Look, if you're expecting everyone that comes through here to be mentally stable I have news for you"

"The evaluations are for determining your usefulness to this base, your mental readiness, and your potential for being a _weed _planted by the Combine to undermine our efforts." She offered them a grim, cold smile, head tilting slightly. As she spoke, Lauren heard footsteps from behind them, and she spun her head to see Don standing there. He seemed a bit startled by the abruptness of her reaction.

"I'm sure you understand that we require the utmost security. There have been plenty of human infiltrators in the past, and so until we're sure about you your lodgings will have to be a bit limited."

"Do we get to sleep?"

Pen nudged her side, pulling back when Lauren flinched. "It's the middle of the day."

"Doooo we get to sleep?"

Iron woman glared and gestured over at Don. "Mister Burns will show you to your room."

Lauren tried to keep her voice deadpan but it caught a little as she spoke. "We're getting all kinds of awesome names today."

Don blinked at her, but didn't say anything, tilting his head slightly and turning to lead them along.

* * *

><p>"It's so much fun being processed here, let me tell you." Lauren coughed after several turns and far too much walking along crowded corridors with boxes of guns and green bottles, holding her arms. "So much better than staying on that train to get processed somewhere else."

"Will you shut up?" Pen elbowed her again, and Lauren flinched badly enough that her arm "accidentally" smacked Pen in the stomach. Don spun on them before anything else could happen, and right as she thought he was going to reprimand them for acting like children and trash talking his homebase he gestured at a set of doors in the hallway they'd reached.

"These are your rooms. You'll be staying here until we can figure out what to do with youâ€"not as bad as it soundsâ€"and you won't be able to leave without supervision so we can be sure no sabotage is going on. The doors don't lock but there's a grate we pull across this hallway to keep people from leaving, so if you want to move between rooms no one's stopping you."

"Burns" was an appropriate surname. His voice sounded like ashes. Completely distracted her from the weird implications of what he just said.

"Confinement aside, I'd enjoy it while you can. Once you're done being processed you don't get your own room."

"Joy of joys." Lauren glanced inside. It was smallâ€"uncomfortably so, but by this point she'd remembered the right way to breathe. â€|Hopefully. Besides, there wasn't anyone else inside, and no cluttered furniture to take up her precious space. Just a bed, a bedside stand, and a chair. She glanced over at her companion. "What's your room look like?"

"Boring." Pen turned to Don. "Do you have something to do while I'm sitting in there? I mean, I don't think I can just sleep in the middle of the day, I really think I should be doing something."

"You have to stay in your room."

"Butâ€" "

"You won't get much sleep later, I'd suggest being fully rested now." He shrugged. "That's how the, uh, proverbial cookie falls apart."

"Crumbles."

He responded with a quick glance her way, and as Pen huffed like the teenager she was and stalked into her room to slam the door, he gave a start and began fishing around in his pocket.

"I, uh, had a friend who used to keep chumtoads around. You're might want one of these," he tossed Lauren a cheap glowstick. "Turn a trashcan or something."

"Ohâ€"thanks." Did she smile? You were supposed to smile when thanking someone but she didn't think she'd made that expression. Too late now, he was already leaving. She bit down on her lip several times, shrugged and walked inside her room.

Wonderful. A proper bed and enough time to sleep in it.

No, she didn't want her chumtoad sleeping in the trash. Even if it was empty. Oh, alternatives, alternativesâ€|

She thought of the nests underground and repressed a shudder, remembering the placement along the walls. The ventilation grate was rather large, placed high up on the left side of the room. Maybe tomorrow she would have to talk to someone about how inappropriate it was for such a secure base to have a man sized vent in the holding room. It might not be something anyone has ever thought about? Licking her lips, she looked for something to turn the screws with, pulling out drawers and checking a small storage compartment under the bed.

Finally she found a dime. The triumph and feelings of cleverness vanished quickly because it was very irritating to turn a screw with a dime.

Frowning, she opened the grate and set the snapped glow stick inside. Ribby sprung upâ€"surprisingly farâ€"and wriggled into the vent. A makeshift nest.

Lauren snorted. Finally the day was over. The incredibly long, hellish day that seemed to span two cycles of daylight. And with that information in mind, suddenly everything seemed so much harder to do. Her head was in a vice, brain burning. The building echoed and shifted, and she flipped off the light switch, holding herself in the darkness. She staggered and flopped down to the bed, crawling up enough to make sure her whole body was supported, and went still.

It took about an hour for her to finally fall asleep, struggling with whether to take the blanket as she knew she should or leave it as she had become accustomed to. She dreamed of waiting on tables of Civil Protection officers and rebels with beer glasses falling to the floor.

End
file.